

What's Up With Lent?

I have a confession to make: I've never really understood the whole Lent thing. My only exposure to Lent was in my teens when my family attended a Lutheran church. But it was an evangelical Lutheran church and there wasn't a lot of "High Church" stuff. And hey, I was a teenager, what Lenten observance there was didn't make an impression. In my twenties and thirties I was a Baptist and Lent was pretty much a low-key affair. Good Friday and Easter Sunday were the big days.

I'm quite sure that my parents didn't know much about Lent either. Their parents, my grandparents, on both sides, came from an earlier generation and Presbyterian culture that had a certain disdain for anything Roman Catholic or High Anglican. They rejected the priestly, liturgical and ceremonial elements of worship. And there was all that other stuff associated with Lent: the fasting, the penitence, the alms giving, the giving up of something for forty days.

At that time Presbyterian and many other Protestant churches regarded traditional Lenten observances as Roman legalism, following rules or you didn't get to heaven. Even John Calvin, the Presbyterian Church's theological father frowned upon Lent calling it "a superstitious observance". Indeed, there is nothing in Scripture that tell us to spend forty days mourning and celebrating Jesus' journey to the cross.

But those practices began and evolved early on. The early Christian theologian Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the apostle John, wrote of the early church's observance of Lent in the mid-second century. It was common to prepare for the celebration of Easter with a two or three day period of penitence and fasting. Originally, the fast was for new Christians preparing for baptism. But it became a way for all church faithful to commemorate Jesus' suffering, and by the fourth century, after the birth of the Roman church, it had expanded to forty days, perhaps because of the significance of Jesus being tempted in the desert for forty days. So as we can see, Lent was not invented by the Roman Catholics. But they certainly put their own stamp upon it.

In the Middle Ages Lent became a compulsory ritual, believers limited themselves to no meat and just one meal a day. Some fasts were more extreme. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, some church members abstained not just from meat, but from eggs, milk, cheese, and any fruit covered by a hard shell. I'm still trying to figure out what hard-shelled fruit would have been in the diet of impoverished Europeans. Then there was the ritual of putting ashes on the forehead. It grew out of a public confession ceremony for sinners that preceded Easter. It became a prescribed practice throughout the church by the eleventh century.

Though the rules for fasting and abstinence have relaxed over the centuries, Roman Catholics still see Lent as a time of self-denial, prayerful contemplation, and, yes, breaded cod. Adults are expected to fast (usually defined as eating one meal a day) on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and to abstain from eating meat on each Friday in Lent. Many Catholics still "give up something for Lent" - chocolate or alcohol, for example. But the emphasis is as likely to be on almsgiving or acts of charity.

Anglicans and Lutherans have long practiced Lent, but most other denominations steered clear of it. Well into the 20th century many Protestants were conflicted about Lent. In 1960 the magazine, *Christianity Today* ran an editorial describing Protestant believers torn between the obligation to "do something about observing the most sacred season in the Christian calendar" and the "sense of indignation that stirs within the Protestant breast... at what the (Roman Catholic) Church has done with Lent in the past." These Protestants could not separate Lenten traditions from their disdain for Rome and its elevation of regulations over scripture. However in the twentieth century Lenten traditions began to spread to some Protestant denominations including our own. The boundaries between traditions are not what they used to be. Crossing them is a steady traffic of believers and seekers and even some ministers and priests. Want to meet someone who was raised Roman Catholic? You'll probably find them in all the mainline churches and a lot of other Protestant denominations. Studies show that about one-third of believers change churches at least once in their lifetime. Inevitably, all this changing of churches ends up changing the churches, as people bring bits of their worship traditions with them.

Another factor is that many of the churches that had originally rejected more formal and deliberate liturgy and ritual are now recovering aspects of a larger Christian tradition; it's a way to refocus on spirituality in a culture that is increasingly secular.

So, what is Lent really all about? It seems to me there are two distinct practices within the Lenten context. There is the more personal, traditional Lenten observance...and there is the corporate reflective worship and prayer.

Many people who practice Lent do certain things. Some people will fast completely or they might give up something: chocolate or alcohol, hamburgers, television...whatever: something that they do regularly. You might consider it a kind of mini-fast. But how does giving up something or fasting for 40 days honour God or draw one closer to Jesus? Well, if its just because its tradition at this time of year, that's what you're supposed to do, and it doesn't lead to deeper communion with God, then I would suggest that it doesn't honour Him; it just becomes empty ritual. But if it is done in genuine humility to deepen the spiritual walk, perhaps that's something else.

Now, I will freely admit that I've never fasted or deprived myself of anything during Lent or at any other time, so I can't speak from experience, but in researching this I discovered dozens of websites, blogs and discussion boards on the internet. In some places I looked there didn't appear to be any spiritual dimension to the observance, it looked to be rather frivolous and silly. Some people, who denied having any Christian faith, even a few atheist gave up something during Lent. But I also found people who find this Lenten practice deeply moving and spiritually enriching.

One person wrote: "Sometimes I don't notice how certain things I do have gained power over me and dictate my actions. In denying and fasting, I

can discover these things and give them up so that God can be in charge.”

Another wrote: “As I fast, pray and give alms devoutly during this beautiful season, I unburden myself of my sins and embrace the loving forgiveness to which the Cross calls me.”

The theme that emerged was that giving up something or fasting takes their focus off themselves, which is of course at the heart of the human condition, and places it upon Christ, the Living God who was obedient unto death.

So what does scripture have to say about this? In the Old and New Testaments fasting was employed by believers as a way of re-focusing their minds on God, repenting of sin, and reminding themselves that God provided for their needs. It was also part of preparing for ministry. In Acts we read that Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed when elders were appointed in churches.

Jesus himself talked about fasting. In Matthew’s Gospel he says: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” When I read that, for the umpteenth time in my life it finally struck me what he was saying. Jesus didn’t say - “if you fast” he said “when you fast”. Sounds to me like it is a required discipline, coming from our Lord himself. Of course, as mentioned earlier, Jesus himself fasted for forty days in the desert. He obviously thought fasting was important. It brought him into closer communion with his father. It was an integral part of his preparation for ministry. And I think we can assume that it wasn’t the only time that he fasted.

So, this fasting and self-denial doesn’t sound like Roman legalism to me. What makes it legalistic is the attitude one has toward it. If we make it a burden, something we are supposed to do at this time of year, with all kinds of rules and regulations associated with it, or if it’s just a frivolous activity, it doesn’t honour God. But if it’s a discipline we take seriously, in humility it draws us closer to Him. It can bring us to the place where we confess our total inadequacy before God, and He strips us bare of all pretenses to righteousness. The Holy Spirit empties us of our false pride, of our rationalizations that prevent us from seeing ourselves as needy creatures, of our perfectionist tendencies that blind us to the log in our own eyes.

The other Lenten practice is reflective worship and prayer in a congregational setting. For many Protestant churches Lent is brushed off and hurried through to get to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. For many of us we are more comfortable with the joy and celebration of Easter than with the darkness that preceded it. But for many people reflective worship and prayer is a chance to remember the dark before the dawn, our sin and brokenness that sent Jesus to the cross. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Lent is called the season of Bright Sadness, because it is a time of both celebration and mourning. But one may well ask: why dwell on the darkness at all? After all, Jesus’ work is done. Death has been conquered, Christ is victorious! The cross has answered it all; why should we be sad? Because, Jesus took our place on the cross. He went alone to be punished: separated from his father and deserted by his friends. The drama of how this happened is the story of Lent. Before the Resurrection comes crucifixion; before crucifixion comes prosecution; before prosecution comes betrayal, doubt, fear, rebellion, and sin.

Reflective worship and prayer enables us to place ourselves before God, humbled, bringing with us no price whereby we can purchase salvation ourselves. It helps us experience our part in the Passion, the suffering of Jesus. We learn that we, like his disciples, would have fallen asleep as Jesus prayed for deliverance in the garden, and, also, that we would have denied knowing him as he silently accepted his death sentence.

But, the good news is that we don’t dwell on the darkness, for out of it comes piercing light of dawn on Easter Sunday. The world is changed, history is rewritten and the future is assured. It is the hope of Easter morning. Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” That’s a remarkable promise. That is the promise of Lent.

By nature we seem to need those special moments that mark our lives, the birthdays, the anniversaries, the weddings, the funerals and other times where we come together as small communities. Lent is a time of year that affords us that opportunity, to bow humbly before God in our own quiet reflection and to join as a congregation in celebrating the glorious gift that is grace, the grace that will raise us whole, healed and perfected with Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of the Father. It’s not easy in our chaotic, stressed, indulgent world to keep our eyes on the prize, and the challenge of Lent, is to carry both the humility and the joy throughout the year. Lent helps us to refocus our eyes, our hearts and our minds on that prize.

So, if you’re unsure about Lent and all of its manifestations, as I was a few short weeks ago, consider it an opportunity to deepen your faith, to humbly draw closer to God and thank Jesus for what he has done for you, for all mankind.